

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chairman's Update: Health Care Reform & Veterans

Congress successfully took action to reform the current health insurance system. This reform does not undermine or change the Department of Veterans Affairs mandate to provide comprehensive health care to veterans. Enrolled veterans meet the individual responsibility requirements under the bill to maintain quality health coverage.

H.R. 3590, the Patient Protection and Affordability Act, and H.R. 4872, the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, provide all Americans the option of quality affordable healthcare. Among the many quality options individuals have, the bill recognizes the programs that provide health coverage to members of the military, veterans, and their families.

Although some TRICARE and VA health care programs are not specifically listed in the legislation, all active duty personnel, veterans and their respective families receiving full health coverage are classified as having met the individual responsibility requirements. There is no specific provision that excludes, reduces support, or harms veterans or their families. As the Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs I am committed to ensuring that if unintended consequences do arise, my Committee will address these issues and take quick action to fix the problem.

This new law provides access to health insurance to the hundreds of thousands of veterans that cannot afford health insurance and do not qualify for VA health care. I am proud that Congress has crafted a plan to bring stability and security to Americans who have insurance today, and affordable coverage to those who do not.

Bob Filner

- Priority Legislation Passed By the House -

Prevent and End Veteran Homelessness

H.R. 4810 increases funding to successful programs for homeless veterans, requires each VA medical center that provides supporting housing services to provide housing counselors, strengthens permanent housing programs, and pays special interest to the needs of homeless women veterans and homeless veterans with children. H.R. 1171 strengthens national efforts to prevent America's heroes from ever becoming homeless.

Protect National Guard Civilian Employment

H.R. 1879 extends key reemployment rights to those called up for full-time National Guard duty. Since September 11, 2001, the National Guard has played a critical role in federal missions, and a small but increasing number of National Guard members are bumping up against the five-year protection for their civilian jobs. This bill provides necessary reemployment rights for certain individuals ordered to full-time National Guard duty.

Safeguard Veteran Homeowners

H.R. 3976 extends expiring protections that safeguard veteran homeowners from foreclosure for nine months following deployment.

Welcome Home Women Veterans

The number of female veterans enrolled for medical care with the Department is expected to increase by 30 percent in the next five years. H.R. 1211 expands and improves VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans currently receiving VA health care, by providing child care at some VA locations and concentrating treatment efforts for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Support Veteran Caregivers

H.R. 3155 provides immediate support for America's wounded warriors – by conducting outreach, providing training, and offering counseling to their caregivers.

Improve Health Care Services

H.R. 3219 establishes the position of Director of Physician Assistant Services, prohibits the VA from collecting certain copayments from veterans who are catastrophically disabled, establishes a Committee on Care of Veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury, and assigns a higher priority status for VA hospital care and medical services for veterans who are recipients of the Medal of Honor.

- FUNDING UPDATE -

A New Direction for Our Nation's Veterans

Under Democratic leadership, Congress has provided a 55% increase in discretionary VA funding. Nearly 85% of VA discretionary spending goes to providing medical care to veterans.

Fiscal Year 2010

Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY 2010 (P.L. 111-117)

- President Obama signed a funding bill that provides a path to restoring and revitalizing the services provided to veterans by adding \$14.5 billion above FY 2009.
- The third straight budget to exceed the request of the *Independent Budget!*
- Under Democratic leadership, Congress has provided a 55% increase for VA medical care funding over the past three years – adding \$18.7 billion to the VA budget baseline.

Fiscal Year 2011

- The President's FY 2011 budget recommends an increase of \$4.3 billion in VA discretionary spending, an increase of nearly 8%.
- The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs supports the President's historic budget request, recommends targeted additional investment, and commits to meeting the needs of the Department of Veterans Affairs for the coming year.
- The Committee requested an additional \$700 million for needed infrastructure investments. When passed, Democrats in Congress will have raised the VA budget by 66%.

Fiscal Year 2012

- President Obama's budget proposal for FY 2011 is the first of its kind. It provides an advance spending plan for the following year, allowing VA to plan medical spending in advance and with assurance of funds.
- The President recommended at least a 5% increase in the amount to be appropriated in advance for VA health care for FY 2012.
- Instead of simply talking about sufficient, timely, and predictable funding for veterans, President Obama delivered and proposed a funding increase for VA medical care for FY 2012.

- ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY - Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

Addressing Needs of Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business

- The Committee understands the urgent need for the Center for Veterans Enterprise to end self-certification and quickly work to improve the support this center provides to veterans.
- H.R. 3949 requires all businesses listed in the VA VetBiz Vendor Information Pages database to be confirmed as veteran-owned small businesses.

Guaranteeing a Solid Post-9/11 G.I. Bill

- Since the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill went into effect in August 2009, \$1.2 billion worth of education benefits have been paid to veteran students. More than 475,000 veterans have been certified as eligible to use this new program.
- 209,834 veteran students are enrolled for the spring semester using their Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits. (206,858 have received payment)
- Interested stakeholders provided the Committee with specific proposals to improve current education benefits provided to veterans at a Congressional roundtable.
- VA plans to introduce a new automated claims system for Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits by the summer of 2010 and will later migrate from the interim processing solution.

Increasing Job Training Opportunities in the Energy Sector

- ***H.R. 4592, Energy Jobs for Veterans Act***, increases job opportunities for veterans by reimbursing energy employers for the cost of providing on-the-job training for veterans in the energy sector. Specifically, the bill creates the pilot “Veterans Energy Related Employment Program” which would award competitive grants to three states that are able to serve a population of eligible veterans, boast a diverse energy industry, and have the ability to carry out such a training program.

- HEALTH -

Ensuring Quality Care for America's Veterans

Preventing and Ending Veteran Homelessness

- Most of the VA's existing programs are targeted to veterans who are currently homeless, by providing employment opportunities and housing assistance to help prevent repeat episodes of homelessness. There is an urgent and immediate need to address prevention, target high-risk veterans with early intervention programs, and provide on-going evaluation and support. Joining the Obama Administration in its goal to end veteran homelessness in five years, the House passed H.R. 1171 to strengthen national efforts to prevent America's heroes from becoming homeless in the first place and H.R. 4810 to reinforce successful support and permanent housing programs.

Improving Health Care Access for All Veterans

- **Rural Veterans:** There is room for improvement in the way the VA manages contract care, which is often used to provide care for rural veterans. The Committee continues to work to strengthen existing VA networks for rural veterans, including telehealth and mobile vet centers.
- **Female Veterans:** Women veterans coming into the VA system are younger, have distinct health needs, and access VA health care at a higher rate. Further, women are serving in combat conditions right alongside their male counterparts, which raises a whole new set of issues for these veterans. H.R. 1211 expands and improves VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans.

Providing Support for Veteran Caregivers

- Today, more service members are surviving the wounds of war than those injured in previous conflicts. Family members and other caregivers have quit jobs, delayed schooling, and made other difficult sacrifices to provide care for injured veterans. The House passed H.R. 3155 to provide immediate support for America's wounded warriors – by conducting outreach, providing training, and offering counseling to their caregivers.

- DISABILITY ASSISTANCE - Attacking the Backlog

Reform of Veterans' Benefits Claims Processing System

- ***Claims Summit 2010: A Call for Solutions***

The Veterans Benefits Administration disclosed that the current claims system is unsustainable and cannot be fixed. Representatives from VBA suggested that improvements to the current system would continue while a complete overhaul is designed and implemented. Although there was agreement between lawmakers, stakeholders, and veterans that far-reaching change is needed, a specific plan has yet to emerge from VA. It is time to return this safety net to the veterans that need it, instead of tolerating a system that allows veterans to lose their homes, lose their cars, or even die waiting for their earned and deserved compensation.

- ***Review of Current Fast-Track Pre-Discharge Programs***

Pre-discharge programs offer a glimmer of hope for a new way forward in the claims processing system. These programs jumpstart the process to get needed and earned benefits to disabled service members who are preparing to leave the military--and they work. VA must better leverage these programs and improve communication, outreach, and services, with the Department of Defense.

- ***Monitoring Implementation of P.L. 110-389***

In 2008, the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act was enacted to provide essential reforms to the claims processing system. Although the steps taken have resulted in improved benefits, the Committee is concerned regarding the lagging timeline and sluggish transformation efforts. Changes like an Office of Survivors Assistance, substitution to allow a claim to continue, the claims checklist, altering the work credit system, and the current pilot programs on expedited processing go a long way to fix the problems that have been plaguing veterans for decades.

Ensure Benefits for Disabled Veterans Keep Pace with Cost of Living

- ***H.R. 4667, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2010***, increases the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans, and for other purposes. The bill would go into effect December 1, 2010.

- OVERSIGHT - Bringing Accountability to the VA

Fighting Waste, Fraud and Abuse

□ ***Acquisition Reform***

The Obama Administration has worked to bring a higher level of transparency to government and serious attention must be paid to the acquisition deficiencies at the VA. The Committee will continue to shed light on this issue until a fair, fiscally responsible, and effective contracting process is established.

□ ***VA Plans to Streamline the Department***

VA Secretary Shinseki presented a wide-ranging plan to transform the agency into a 21st Century organization. Chairman Filner supports the Secretary's goal to more efficiently organize the functions of VA and stands ready to work with VA leaders on a detailed proposal to reach the goal of improved services and taxpayer savings.

Triggering VA Action on Gulf War Illness

- Committee action has pushed the VA for firm answers on the way forward for Gulf War veterans. When these troops returned home, some reported symptoms that were believed to be related to their service. To this day, they wait for answers about proper medical treatment and the benefits they bravely earned on the battlefield.

Improving Transition to Civilian Status

□ ***Communication Gap between DoD and VA Hurts Wounded Warriors***

Veterans report a complicated and inconsistent reintegration process that can allow wounded veterans to fall through the cracks. Congress continues to pass laws and provide oversight, but until lifetime electronic medical records are a reality, the military commits to proactive medical screenings for traumatic brain injury, and the VA actively seeks to counsel veterans in need, wounded veterans will continue to be harmed because they cannot access the care and benefits they need. The Committee continues to vigorously move these Departments in the appropriate direction.